

WHEN CHRISTMAS DOESN'T SMELL LIKE YOU EXPECTED

NATALIE: Welcome to Episode 307 of the Flying Free Podcast, and Merry Christmas to all of our listeners who are celebrating this holiday this week. I'm actually recording this in October, so I did put some Christmas music on my phone just to give me the Christmas vibe for this episode. I'm going to make this short and sweet so that you can get on with your day and your festivities and whatever they hold for you. I just want to share a few thoughts about our nose and our sense of smell, and relate that to Christmas—I think it's pretty easy to make that connection—as well as memories, both good and bad.

But first, I want to tell you a story. For over ten years, I ran a cold process soap company. I made the soap with my own two hands in my own kitchen. I was making four loaves a day—big, huge, long loaves by the time I sold my business. And I would only use essential oils to scent my bars, and our entire house smelled like essential oils. Imagine that many years of making soap every day. Well, that smell was in our walls, it was in our carpeting, it was in our clothes, it was in our furniture.

When people would come over, they would exclaim over the scent of our home and they would always tell me how much they loved it. They could always smell whatever bars I had whipped up on that particular day because those would have the strongest smell, but there was also this ongoing blend of all the essential oils that I used, and I used every single one you could possibly imagine.

Some people told me, “Oh, it smells just like an Aveda shop,” or “It smells just like a candle shop.” But the smell wasn't just in our home. Whenever our family went to church, we would walk through the entryway and people would turn and look at us and say, “Oh, my goodness, your family smells so good.” Or I would pick up a child from Sunday school class and they would exclaim over how good that child smelled.

I had to take their word for it because I didn't know. I couldn't smell it. My family and I were living in the smell and so we could no longer smell it. Now, I had heard of people who live near really stinky manufacturing plants and how they can't smell it after a while. Well, our noses also became immune to that smell until we could no longer detect it.

Here's the thing: Not everyone liked the way we smelled. I remember one time returning a pillow to a furniture store. I had purchased it thinking that it would go with the couch that we had, and it had been sitting in our home for about 48 hours, and I

realized, "This is not the pillow for me." But in that time, it had collected the smell of our home, which also was unbeknownst to me.

So when I brought it back to the store, the returns clerk was visibly upset by the smell of the pillow. She told me she couldn't take it back because it smelled so terrible. She said, "It reeks like patchouli." Now, it's true that I did use patchouli in one of our soap bars, but I was horrified to think that I would smell like patchouli or that that pillow smelled like patchouli because patchouli, if you've never smelled it, you should just know, it is definitely an acquired taste. It was a popular essential oil back in the 1960s and '70s during the flower children days. Everyone wore patchouli. And a lot of people love patchouli. I actually don't hate it. I also don't love it, but some people really, really hate it. And some people really, really love it.

Another time I was checking out my groceries and the clerk said, "Oh my word, can you smell that horrible smell? Ugh, I wonder where it's coming from. I just want to puke. It's absolutely god-awful." I was so embarrassed. Of course, I could not smell it, but I knew exactly what she was talking about. I just smiled and acted like I didn't know what was going on and took my groceries and got out of there quickly. I didn't know what any of these people were really talking about. I could only take their word for it.

But then I got divorced, sold the soap business, and I moved into a new house. Well, I mean, it wasn't a new house, but it was a new house to me. I remember the first time that I went to pick up my boys from their dad's house. They had been at their dad's house for a few days. They got in the car when I picked them up, and the entire car immediately filled with this strong odor that I could not describe, but it was truly awful to me.

Interestingly, it smelled familiar and it brought back overwhelming feelings, also, of sadness and loss. So even though I had grown unaware of the smell while I was living in it, my brain and body were so familiar with it that I recognized it when they got in the car then. But also, I didn't like it.

It's been seven years now, at the time of this recording, since I was divorced. And every time I pick my boys up from their dad's house, I can smell that smell on their clothes. That house carries that scent to this day. Sometimes I'll open up a bin that was in storage that had storage items that were brought over from that house. I think I've pretty much opened all of them by now. I remember opening up those bins for the first time and the scent that would waft up from the bin was just overwhelming.

So what's my point in this story? Well, we could draw this analogy. First of all, when

we're living in an abusive environment, we can become numb to it. It can seem normal to us, even though it is so very not normal. Sometimes women will make comments in our private Flying Free Kaleidoscope forum about what they're experiencing, and the way that they say it or word it will give the impression that they think it's not that big of a deal. But now when I read some of those comments, I see just how horrifying it is because I've been in a normal relationship for seven years, so now I know what normal actually looks like and feels like. So when I smell something that's not normal, it reeks.

You guys, I think many of our religious environments stink, but we think they smell good. I remember going to church and thinking, "Yeah, we are the fragrance of Christ here at this church." We think we smell like an Aveda shop. But when people from these environments who've been programmed in certain ways go out into the world to interact with people who are hurting, or sometimes we're like those people in the Bible, those priests in the Bible who just walk right past the wounded Samaritan... Or no, it wasn't a Samaritan. What is that story called, the story of the neighbor who got beat up and then the Samaritan actually saves him?

Anyways, we're kind of like those priests that just walk by. We don't even care about those who are hurting. I mean, Jesus told that story for a reason. And notice how Jesus used religious people that were walking by and not caring about the person that was beat up. And then He used the Samaritan in the story—back in those days was like the untouchable—and the Samaritan was the one who actually helped the man who was beat up.

So, Jesus was making a really important point, and I think that that point could be made to this day. When we are going out into the world and we think that we smell great, but we're interacting with people whose lives are crumbling around them, we can see that some of us in these religious environments, we've lost the plot, you guys. These people are unaware that they really are no longer the fragrance of Christ, but a stench, literally a stench to the world around us.

Yes, it is sad to say this, but many people who call themselves Christians are very stinky in their thoughts and behaviors. And to them, it seems like they smell amazing and that they're making a difference in the world and they're just going out and bringing people to Christ or whatever they think they're doing, when they're actually turning away so many people from Christ by their lack of true love and acceptance and true willingness to help.

So, today is a day that we often think of in terms of things that smell good, right? We think of smells like spiced cider or the fur needles that are on our Christmas tree or

gingerbread or even a roaring fire that has a particular smell. And these smells can bring back beautiful memories, and they can also bring back painful memories.

So I don't know where you're at today. Maybe you're going to be gathering with a large family, and maybe the biggest issue that you're going to be having today is just navigating an emotional minefield with those certain people that you know that are in your family. I think everyone has people like that in their family. Or maybe you're just going to be gathering with one or two of your children by yourselves in a small apartment, making the most of what little you have. Maybe you're going out with friends because your family has rejected you.

Maybe it'll just be you and an emotionally abusive husband, and you'll need to be working hard emotionally, expending your energy to placate him just to keep the peace for this day. And maybe you'll feel like you failed by the time you crawl into bed. Maybe you're going to be all alone today wondering how in the world you got here and how you're ever going to get to the other side.

For me today, my ex-husband has our kids on Christmas day, so my husband and I are going to be home alone and we will likely go over to visit his elderly mother who lives alone in the city next to us. Tom takes care of her. Every year is different because the plans shift and change, and some of my kids are married, and there are in-laws, and there are boyfriends and girlfriends and their families, and it's just an ever-evolving situation. Our traditions are non-traditional. We don't really have any consistent traditions anymore. So every year it's kind of an adventure just to see, "Wonder what Christmas is going to look like this year?"

But every year we need to make a choice about what we want this season to mean for us and what we want this day to mean for us because we're going to be celebrating our Christmas on a completely different day. It won't be on Christmas Eve and it won't be on Christmas Day. It'll be a completely different day this year. At the time of this recording, I don't even know what day it's going to be.

But we have to make a choice about what we want it to mean for us, whether we get to be with our family or not, or whether we get to be with all of our family or not. Will all of our family be able to get together? Maybe as Christian women, we thought in terms of, "Oh, when I grow up, everyone's going to come to the home of grandpa and grandma and everyone will be together every Christmas. And it'll just be like that until the day I die on my deathbed of old age, and everyone will gather around me and rise up and call me blessed on my way to eternity." That's literally what I thought my life was going to be like. That's what I dreamed of. It was very idealistic. And that's just not what life is

for 99.99999% of the world's population, today and in all of history. So I'm not sure where I got that idea, but I did.

What I want us to do now before we go is just to reflect on that very first Christmas when a baby boy was born into poverty from a mother who had not been wed when she conceived him. That was the perspective of everyone around them. Nobody wanted them. The only ones who believed them were a few poor shepherds who had no influence and no power.

And then what followed after that momentous birth that we hear and celebrate at Christmas? You know what came after that? Years and years and years and years of nothing but hard work and the mundane day in and day out of life on planet earth, eking out a survival. That's it.

I often wonder, how did Jesus smell to those around Him during those years? I'm not talking about His body odor, okay? I'm talking about the scent of His personhood. I believe it was probably very attractive, very pleasant. I believe the people around Him probably felt safe and warm, like He was home to them.

And I believe this, that His Spirit lives today within you, carving out that same safe, warm, and home-like scent within your own heart, whether you are sitting in the middle of a crowd of people, in front of a feast on a table, or sitting by yourself in a wooden chair at a cold table with a stale sandwich to keep you company.

Your external circumstances are what they are, but you? You are something different altogether. We are powerless most of the time as to what our external circumstances are going to look like from any given day to day or year to year. But deep inside of us is a space, a sacred space, where we can co-create with Jesus Christ a fragrance of love. And that love must start with love for the little me that lives within us.

You are not alone today. The Holy Spirit is in that sacred space within you where nobody else can touch it, where no one else can take that away. And your little me is sitting there with Him, her head on His shoulder, His arms around hers, and the beautiful smell of pure love surrounding both of them. At some point today, you may smell something delicious, and I just hope that it reminds you of who you belong to. Merry Christmas, beautiful butterfly.